

Pennsylvania

Involving the Community in Reducing Overweight

Public Health Problem

A 2002 study conducted by the Pennsylvania Department of Health showed that 35 percent of a large statewide sample of eighth graders were at risk for being overweight or already were overweight. Recognizing that a significant percentage of students could be at risk for heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic conditions associated with overweight, the Pennsylvania Department of Health decided to update its longstanding growth screening program to more effectively measure students' growth patterns and their risk for overweight.

Taking Action

In fall 2003, the Department of Health conducted a pilot of this updated growth screening program in 10 public and private schools, based on anthropometric measurements collected by school nurses using CDC's 2000 growth reference. These pilot schools represented urban, suburban, and rural districts as well as various grade and enrollment levels. Each school nurse used an updated program manual and one of three tools to determine BMI: 1) a table from CDC (Calculated BMI Values for Selected Heights and Weights for Ages 2 to 20 Years), 2) a BMI wheel, or 3) one of two computer programs including NutStat, a part of the Epi Info public-domain software package. Newly revised gender-appropriate growth charts from CDC were provided for plotting BMI-for-age percentiles. Nurses also received a sample letter they could use to inform parents of screening results.

During the pilot, department staff visited participating schools to observe school staff who were obtaining height and weight measurements, determining BMI, and plotting BMI-for-age percentiles. Department staff also provided technical assistance and verified the accuracy of measurements and calculations.

Implications and Impact

The pilot screening program found that 38 percent of students tested were overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, which confirmed that overweight is a serious problem for the school-age population. In September 2004, the Department of Health announced that the revised growth-screening program would be implemented statewide. The revised procedures are voluntary for school year 2004-2005. Mandatory implementation will begin in 2005-2006 for grades K-4 and will expand to three additional grades each year until all 12 grades are included. Each school district and charter school will receive materials that provide guidance on proper height and weight measurement, calculation and plotting of BMI, and how to notify parents or guardians of screening results. This new screening procedure will help educate children and their parents about the risks of being overweight and bolster other initiatives promoting active lifestyles and healthy food choices.

Contact Information

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